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Aseema Sinha

Claremont McKenna College

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A Story of Four Revolutions: Mechanisms of Change in India

Aseema Sinha

Sumit Ganguly and Rahul Mukherji’s *India Since 1980* presents a bold and ambitious argument about change across and within India. Its unique contribution lies in its description of four distinct revolutions: social-political, economic, foreign policy, and religious. While many recent books have noted changes in India’s economy and foreign policy, *India Since 1980* will be known for its juxtaposition of four different themes in one short, pithy volume. Even if one may disagree with the authors’ choice of the four dimensions of change, the book’s dominant message is that India is changing across a whole range of policies and arenas.

India Since 1980 represents an emerging, although not fully accepted, consensus of the need to privilege change over continuity in our understanding of India. The conventional understanding of India is of strong historical legacies and path dependence. Most tend to see India through the lens of continuing chaos, disorder, and persistent violence and conflict. This is usually attributed to the nexus of old vested interests that are locked in. In contrast, this book gently urges us to shift the frames and thematic lenses through which we view India. *India Since 1980* tells a story of a country experiencing multiple and simultaneous transformations. The book is also notable for its optimistic tone, with its focus on the making of India into a more “representative polity” (p. 2) as well as on positive trends such as the resilience of independent regulatory institutions (p. 9). The authors observe: “The rise of violent religious intolerance, the failure of national governments to curb it, and the growth of political corruption are all dangerous and corrosive trends. Yet focusing on them alone

ASEEMA SINHA is the Wagener Chair of South Asian Politics and a George R. Roberts Fellow at Claremont McKenna College. She can be reached at <aseema.sinha@cmc.edu>.

would provide a sadly incomplete account of Indian democracy” (p. 9). Conflict and violence is an ongoing reality in India but so is change and the persistent demand for development.

According to the authors, this change in India has been long in the making but is no less significant as a result. I agree. Even if India, unlike many countries of the post-Communist region, did not experience a massive change in one instant, it is reaching a tipping point, when all the slow and incremental changes over the past decades are cumulating and coming together. In this respect, the book is not alone, as many scholars on India have grappled with this issue.¹ These books together paint a picture of India that is at odds with our preexisting conceptions and ideas about the prospect of change in India.

While there are some problems with the authors’ specific claims, given the book’s ambitious frame, the arguments would be best served by taking the research agenda suggested by the book’s foreword. The important analytical question is: Do the changes described by the authors demand a new research agenda for the study of Indian politics and political economy? I would argue for such a new framework and new research questions to understand the combination of the four revolutions.

First, however, I have a few specific problems with some interpretations in the book. The Indian story of change needs to be placed in comparative perspective. The revolutions in India are different from changes in post-Communist countries and in Latin America, and are even more striking for that reason. Comparatively, the changes in India represent a “change within institutions” rather than “a change of institutions.”² Change in India has been rapid but has also occurred within the institutional framework inherited from the past. India did not undergo a democratic transition or the kind of “big bang” economic shock that required not only policy reform but also the creation of new markets and private actors. This comparative perspective implies that the puzzle of how change happens deserves serious analysis and that we

¹ For example, see Sanjay Ruparelia, Sanjay Reddy, John Harriss, and Stuart Corbridge, eds., *Understanding India’s New Political Economy: A Great Transformation?* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Indian Politics and Society Since Independence: Events, Processes and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Akhil Gupta and K. Sivaramakrishnan, eds., *The State in India after Liberalization: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Atul Kohli, *Poverty Amid Plenty in the New India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000). The volume *Understanding India’s New Political Economy* deserves special mention because it is one of the few books to pose the question about multiple transformations in terms of “liberal economic reforms, the ascendance of Hindu cultural nationalism, and the empowerment of historically subordinate classes through popular democratic mobilization” in a parallel way. The volume’s editors call this India’s “Great Transformation.”

² Kenneth Shepsle, “Studying Institutions: Some Lessons from the Rational Choice Approach,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 1, no. 2 (1989): 131–49.

should attend to the institutional fabric and global levers of change that may have created the conditions for many revolutions. As the authors themselves document in the four chapters, change has crept in slowly and sometimes without design or intention.

The book could also have focused attention on the ideational and conceptual frames in Indian politics that are melting into air.³ What is striking about change in India is that it is not only a change of interests, coalitions, and policies but also a reconceptualization of key ideational notions and frames. Notions of socialism, nationalism, antipathy to the profit motive, and India's status as a developing country, as well as ideas about development, are being modified and debunked. To be sure, the chapter on foreign policy mentions the decline of nonalignment as an ideational frame, but more systematic attention to other shifting "master frames" of India would have been an important contribution of the book. India offers a fascinating laboratory to the cultural historian, especially in the current era. Many postmodern scholars need to re-learn the skills of a historian to document the fascinating changes evident in the Indian discursive landscape and leave behind the fashionable theorizations that instead preoccupy them.

It is important to distinguish between two different kinds of consequences for democracy of the political mobilization that the authors describe. India has witnessed not only the silent revolution—the rise of lower-caste and regional identities—but also the rise of the Hindutva movement, marked by the ascent of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This rise of religious nationalism represents a shift toward a form of majoritarianism that may run counter to the trend toward greater representation. So, India is undergoing two different social revolutions, and they run into different directions in terms of their effects. One effect is a positive one for representativeness and inclusiveness, and the other effect, while increasing elite competition, may have negative consequences for the quality of Indian democracy.

Ganguly and Mukherji, however, raise larger issues of the timing, causal mechanisms, and sources of the changes they describe so well. Thus, the book calls for an analytical argument about causal drivers and levers of change. Perhaps that was not possible in a short book, but this argument deserves some discussion.

What are the causes and sources of the changes described in *India Since 1980*? I argue that there are three distinct sources of the four revolutions taken together. The first arises from below: from changes in the economic structure,

³ Karl Marx famously wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, "All that is solid melts into air."

class composition, and class and collective action. The rise of regional states in terms of both political changes and economic developments created political and social mobilization at different levels of the polity.⁴ These bottom-up changes include the rise of agrarian capitalists, the diversification of industrialization across regions and sectors, the rise of rich peasant classes, the emergence and consolidation of service and technocratic capital, and the deepening of the Indian middle classes. They also include the spread of literacy and with it expectations across India's hinterland. According to the 2011 census, 74% of the Indian population is now literate. The movement at the base of Indian society out of traditional poverty but yet into new kinds of poverty is fueling the changes described in the revolutions related to political and social mobilization as well as the demand for economic reforms.⁵ New winners and new losers have been created in India's political economy. Interestingly, the losers are demanding greater participation in the new economy, creating a revolution of rising expectations.⁶

There is also an external and top-down lever of change that originates at the national and international levels. India's slow but irreversible entry into the global marketplace, changing geopolitical and geoeconomic realities, and new global regimes have created new sources of transformation within India's politics and economy.⁷ *India Since 1980* acknowledges the role of changing geopolitical realities on India's foreign policy priorities and agendas.⁸ I would emphasize that even though this mechanism of change is the most obvious in an understanding of India's foreign policy, its effect on economic reforms, and also on the support for economic reforms across India's classes and groups, warrants more attention. Here, I am calling for a new analytical framework that incorporates international factors in our understanding of all—foreign, economic, and security policy—changes. Some domestic political changes also have deeper global roots. All parties within India are expressing different cleavages, shaped by global connections and India's position in the world. Insofar as rapid economic growth has begun to change India's foreign and

⁴ Aseema Sinha, *The Regional Roots of Developmental Politics in India: A Divided Leviathan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

⁵ Anirudh Krishna, "Escaping Poverty and Becoming Poor: Who Gains, and Who Loses, and Why?" *World Development* 32, no. 1 (2004): 121–36.

⁶ Aseema Sinha, "India: A Revolution of Rising Expectations" (unpublished manuscript).

⁷ I elaborate this argument in the forthcoming book *When David Meets Goliath: How Global Markets and Rules Are Shaping India's Rise to Power*.

⁸ Besides the book's authors, other scholars that focus on international dimensions include T.V. Paul and E. Sridharan. These scholars do a good job of focusing on security dimensions. However, scholars of democratization or the economy have not yet thought about how the international variables are beginning to affect domestic variables and vice versa.

security policy calculations, there is an important reverse effect of domestic changes on international positions. This reciprocal interaction of domestic and international aspects in a changing India needs a new analytical framework where the role of global factors, both as causes and as consequence, is analyzed explicitly. Scholars of India need to engage with and examine the intersection of international variables and domestic dimensions.

The third mechanism of change underlying the four revolutions is diffusion processes across different levels and themes. Diffusion can be seen in terms of the interaction among political, economic, and social mobilizations, which in turn is having an impact on India's foreign policy positions. A horizontal competition across Indian states and different regional elites and the tendency of the BJP to become more subaltern⁹ represent the intersection of at least three revolutions. Social groups and many actors are beginning to copy, and learn from, each other. The social revolution is beginning to affect the economic and foreign policy revolutions. Economic development has become the basis for India's foreign-policy standing, and therefore we need to assess the intersection of these overlapping revolutions. Even if the four revolutions originated at different times and are due to different causal mechanisms, they are beginning to feed into each other. Such linkages and diffusion processes are creating a feedback loop across the revolutions and deserve further scrutiny and research.

In sum, *India Since 1980* is quite interesting and pathbreaking for its reframing of India's past and future trajectories. India is not merely emerging as an economic powerhouse, but its history reveals multiple changes across four distinct dimensions. The shape of domestic politics and society is very different than before. Scholars would do well to pay attention to these changes despite continuities within India. In order to do so, however, it is important to develop a new framework that attends to microprocesses of change as well as to how the world shapes and is shaped by a changing India.

⁹ Tariq Thachil, "Embedded Mobilization: Nonstate Service Provision as Electoral Strategy in India," *World Politics* 63, no. 3 (2011): 434–69.